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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 001055

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: XINJIANG: NO EVIDENCE OBSERVED OF MEDIA-REPORTED
CRACKDOWN ON ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

REF: A. 08 BEIJING 2864
[1](#)B. 08 BEIJING 3426

Classified By: Deputy Political Section Chief Ben Moeling. Reasons 1.4
(b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Despite rumors of arrests of underground or terrorism-related religious practitioners, the overall atmosphere in Xinjiang seemed more relaxed than on previous PolOff trips in advance of and just following the 2008 Olympics (Refs A and B), with no checkpoints and fewer propaganda posters visible. Reports that beards and head coverings have been outlawed and that young men have been banned from worshipping in mosques appeared to be untrue, as PolOffs observed women wearing headscarves in public and mosques full of worshippers, including bearded young men. A local Imam stated that all Islamic extremism in Xinjiang is "imported" and further suggested that Xinjiang's dire employment situation may impact social stability and lead to an increase in religious extremism. While local Muslims denied any recent crackdown on religious activities, a local Christian reported that "government management" sometimes impedes Christian congregations' ability to worship. End Summary.

Unofficial Visit

[1](#)2. (C) PolOffs traveled to Hotan (Mandarin: Hetian), Xinjiang April 8-11, partly to investigate the veracity of a series of press reports and allegations by overseas Uighur groups of wide-spread human rights abuses in southern Xinjiang. The Provincial Foreign Affairs Office was not involved in the trip, so no official meetings took place. PolOffs gathered information through informal conversations with local residents.

Atmosphere More Relaxed

[1](#)3. (C) The atmosphere in southern Xinjiang was much more relaxed than it was around the 2008 Olympics (Refs A and B). In contrast with previous trips, there were no checkpoints on roads in or outside of Hotan, and airline tickets and ID are no longer required to enter airports in Xinjiang. PolOffs observed that passengers are no longer required to disembark before vehicles can refuel at service stations. While PolOffs saw a few freshly-posted propaganda posters condemning ethnic separatism and illegal religious activities, they were outnumbered by posters about Hu Jintao's scientific development concept.

No Restrictions on "Legitimate Religious Practices"

[1](#)4. (C) Press reports indicating a widespread crackdown on legitimate religious practices, including allegations of

restricting worship to the elderly and the prohibition of beards for men and head coverings for women do not appear to be true. PolOffs observed many bearded men and veiled women in the city of Hotan, with head coverings ranging from hair-covering scarves to full Saudi-style abbayas and occasional burqas. PolOffs observed Friday prayers at four separate mosques, both urban and rural, and noted large numbers of young men worshipping at all of them. The police station in Zawa village, outside of Hotan, told PolOff that no restriction exists on beards or head coverings. Yang Yong (protect), the Imam of the Hotan City Hui Mosque, stated that while long-standing prohibitions on children under 18 entering the mosque still exist, there are no additional age-based restrictions. He further stated that relatively young Uighur men, between the ages of 20 and 30, form the majority of his congregation.

Arrests of Home-Practitioners

15. (C) Several individuals stated that they had heard rumors of arrests of house-based religious practitioners. One local resident claimed that the arrests were based on the number of people gathered rather than due to any religious offence. "A few people" can gather together to worship without problems, but when the number approaches 10 or more, the police are likely to take note, he said. Another local resident alleged that house arrests are occurring, but only when the participants are involved with terrorism or other "illegal religious activities." Yang Yong, the Hui Imam, claimed arrests occurred not for religious activities but for "underground training by extremist forces."

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Cross-County Worship

16. (C) Radio Free Asia in an April 7 article alleged that "hundreds" of people were arrested at the "Qariqash County shrine" outside of Hotan and detained at the Zawa Village Police Station for worshipping at a shrine outside of their home district, a practice RFA refers to as "cross-county worship." PolOffs visited four shrines outside of Hotan, where residents confirmed that "cross-county worship" is legal. One devotee at the Mazar Imam Asim shrine had come from as far as Urumqi to worship. At the Mazar Imam Masukazim shrine, a local baker confirmed that during Friday prayers, "many people" come to the shrine from Hotan and surrounding areas. In the bazaar outside of the Mazar Imam Aftab shrine, two students confirmed that they had heard of arrests taking place at the shrine, but declined to comment further. At the Zawa Village police station, the police initially did not deny that arrests had occurred, but after pressing PolOff on the source of the allegations, later stated that they "hadn't heard of" any arrests.

Conversations with an Imam

17. (C) "No domestically produced (Islamic) extremism exists in China" said Yang Yong, the Hui Imam, adding that all extremism is "imported" from outside China. However, "a large market" for extremist beliefs "such as Wahabbism" exists in Xinjiang. Yang blamed the spread of extremism on poor education, a failing economy and confusion about the true meaning of the Koran. Yang argued that many in Xinjiang were "susceptible to being misled" about Islam's teachings because they were born into the faith and did not spend time investigating the Koran for themselves. Yang said he is working to "educate" his congregation about what he sees as the true and nonviolent meaning of the Koran and believes extremism in Xinjiang is "a temporary problem." The government is also working to stop the influx of extremism by taking down extremist websites, vetting all foreign donations to mosques through "the MFA, the State Council and others,"

according to Yang, and increasing education. Yang also noted that minors under the age of 18 are not allowed to worship because "they are not mature enough to decide for themselves." Yang, who is fluent in both Uighur and Chinese, said that his congregation is at least 90 percent Uighur, which is consistent with what PolOff observed during Friday prayers.

Christians: Also Feeling Pressure?

18. (C) Though the Christian population of Hotan is small, one local Christian with whom PolOff spoke said that attending church services has been more difficult recently because of "more intensive government management." Ba Qian'an (protect), a Han native of Hubei Province and practicing Christian told PolOff that "government management" of Hotan Christians is "cyclical" with authorities sometimes allowing prayer gatherings and sometimes cracking down. Ba usually gathers with 20 other local Christians to worship a number of times every week but had not been able to do so for more than a week. Ba refused to speculate on the reasons for recent limitations. Ba said that it is "far more difficult" to be a Christian in Xinjiang than in his native Hubei even in the best of times. The "Hubei Communist Party" supports Christians by building churches, and giving gifts on Christmas, but the Xinjiang government provides no such support, said Ba.

A More Pressing Issue: Employment

19. (C) A number of locals noted the increasingly difficult employment situation. Mehmeti Jan (protect), an ethnically Uighur manager at the government-run Hotan City Human Resources Bureau, said that jobs were available if those looking were "willing to lower their standards." He conceded that ethnically Han people in Hotan generally have an easier time finding work than ethnic Uighurs, primarily due to linguistic factors. A cab driver agreed that jobs are easier to find for Han job seekers saying "Uighurs look for work for weeks, but Han people can find a job the day after they arrive." Hui Imam Yang Yong commented that employment will continue to be a major problem in Xinjiang and one that may ultimately impact social stability, particularly as the financial crisis has "arrived in Xinjiang" and "will probably make the market for extremism much larger."

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